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HEDGING STRATEGIES FOR NEGOTIATION BY AN IRANIAN AND A MALAYSIAN COMPANY IN PROJECT MEETINGS

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Abstract. This study examines the negotiation dynamic between an Iranian company (IC) and a Malaysian company (MC). The study narrows the investigation to the usage of hedging strategies in problem-solving negotiation interactions that function as negotiation strategies. A collection of five problem-solving negotiation interactions in project meetings were analyzed to identify the hedging strategies applied by the two negotiating parties. This study involves two main theories Taxonomy of Hedging Strategies (indetermination, subjectivization and depersonalization), functions of hedging strategies (mitigating and intensifying), and Types of Negotiation Strategy (integrative and distributive strategies). It was found that indetermination strategy was significantly exercised by MC, while subjectivisation and indetermination strategies were predominantly exercised by IC. Albeit the dominant usages by both parties, there were dual functions of some hedging strategies by IC and MC which are both indetermination and subjetivisation. Both hedging strategies functioned as mitigating and intensifying while depersonalization functioned as merely mitigating for MC and intensifying for IC. For negotiation strategies, the use of hedging strategies by IC was prone intensifying, this led to the gist of distributive strategies while MC was subjected to mitigating, integrative were the substance of the negotiation strategies. Nevertheless, there were dual strategies exercised in certain negotiation interactions which indicated that both hold the purpose of maintaining rapport and directiveness/ dominance in the particular negotiations. These findings revealed that by acknowledging and understanding the usage and functions of hedging strategies for negotiations, both negotiating parties could sufficiently recognize appropriate responses towards the negotiators' attitudes and eventually produced desirable negotiation processes and outcomes.

Keywords: *negotiation, hedging strategies, negotiation strategies, cross-cultural negotiation*

Introduction

In business domain, interaction and communication play cardinal roles in solving problems and issues. They are essential for establishing and maintaining high-quality working relationships (Wahid et al., 2024) as well as for improving performance and dedication (Curado et al., 2022), particularly when it comes to project meetings. Meetings and negotiation frequently coexist in business-related and organizational contexts. While meetings provide forums for deliberations, choices, and cooperation, negotiation, especially problem-solving interaction, is essential to determining the final solutions. In any project, problems, conflicts and issues will certainly occur within a project. In order to settle disputes, align goals, and reach advantageous agreements, negotiation is commonly incorporated into meeting discussions that is related to negotiating contexts. Thus, negotiation serves as a vital tool to resolve conflicts and resolve issues by facilitating interactions, helping parties identify common ground, and

finding acceptable solutions for all involved. This is particularly important in meetings involving diverse negotiating parties with conflicting priorities (Kovács and Spens, 2023).

Effective solutions in meetings often involve contemplating negotiations between different options. Problem-solving negotiation helps facilitate this process by enabling participants to express their preferences, make concessions, and find solutions that satisfy as many parties as possible. In this way, negotiation smoothens discussions and drives the creation of solutions that are not only acceptable but often optimal for all stakeholders involved (Yuan, 2024) and negotiation helps ensure that everyone involved in the meeting feels their needs have been considered, fostering a sense of ownership and commitment to the solution made (Yuan, 2024). This process is especially important in project meetings where collective action to solve issues and problems is needed. The project meetings prepare a platform for team members to mutually examine problems, brainstorm or present ideas, and find effectual or practical solutions. Problem-solving meeting negotiation interactions allow the team to quickly diagnose issues and implement targeted solutions to successfully steer projects back on track. Failure in solving problems within a project might lead to significant financial losses, harms reputation, have legal ramifications, affect employee wellbeing, stifles relationships with stakeholders, stifles innovation, and endangers communities and the environment (Ullah et al., 2023). For that reason, the researcher opts for problem-solving negotiation interactions for the study.

Hedging strategies for negotiation

Hedging is one of the linguistics tools to negotiate. According to Handford (2010) as well as Martin-Martin (2008), hedging is modus used to lessen the potential face-threatening nature in business meeting by reducing the directness of an utterance. They, according to Hassan and Said (2020), specifically lessen the accuracy of a statement, which lessens the illocutionary force of requests and direct questions which serves as mitigating devices. Hedging is especially common in meetings, most likely as a scheme to maintain rapport (Hassan, 2019). While hedging can be a useful negotiation tool, its misuse or misinterpretation can lead to misunderstanding or miscommunication in negotiations, potentially damaging the negotiation process. In many contexts, negotiators may use hedging strategies to signal flexibility or openness to negotiation. However, the counterpart may misinterpret these hedges as a lack of confidence or a refusal to commit, leading to a perception of the speaker as unreliable, non-assertive, a non-committal or insincere attempt (Hyland, 2010). While hedging is often used to maintain politeness or reduce conflict, its overuse can be problematic too. When used excessively, hedging can lead to ambiguity and make it difficult for the other party to discern the negotiator's true position or intentions. Overuse can thus hinder the negotiation process by creating confusion and reducing clarity, causing the other party to second-guess the negotiator's commitments or priorities and may undermine the perception of decisiveness or strong negotiation leadership (Pomerantz and Heritage, 2022). This study thus shed light on the usage and functions of hedging devices by comparing the hedging devices exercised by two negotiating companies. Hence, hedging strategies are important rhetorical means to the negotiators for attending to listeners' needs and assessing their reactions during negotiations. The interpretation of the usage and functions of hedging strategies in negotiations might be misleading and mistaken as impolite, arrogant, rude or it may even lead to miscommunication and this

could be vice versa, where when speakers fail to apply hedging strategies appropriately, they can be seen as rude, disrespectful, arrogant, or simply inappropriate (Fraser, 2010). These claims were substantiated by a study by Gribanova and Gaidukova (2019) who affirm that incorrect or improper usage of hedging during an interaction could make a speaker seem arrogant, offensive and impolite. This thus indicates that hedging strategies are parts of negotiation strategies.

Negotiation strategies

According to Pérez-Yus et al. (2020), the strategy that negotiators employ during the negotiation process is the primary factor that determines how successful the negotiation is. For this study of business negotiations, Walton and McKersie (1965) integrative and distributive negotiation strategies were adapted and adopted. Fundamentally, according to Pérez-Yus et al. (2020), designating negotiation strategies are based on the negotiators' negotiation objectives, context, issues, dominance and position, language used, and several other contextual factors. According to Barthelmess et al. (2018), integrative and distributive factors also have an impact on the nature of negotiation encounters, including the parties' relationship, the information exchanged during the negotiation, the topics of the negotiation, and the language used and linguistic devices employed. They also have a major impact on how those encounters end. This makes it very evident that language devices are a component of negotiation strategies. Identifying the hedging strategies usage is important for this study in order to determine the negotiation strategies. Practitioners may employ this as a significant linguistic reference when negotiating in business, particularly when addressing and solving problems.

Background of the study

The main problem of this study pertains to the limited studies on workplace communication regarding negotiation and acknowledging what was going on during negotiation in project meetings. The lack of studies in negotiation process in business negotiation (specifically project meetings) is contributed through this study. Although the communication of discourse analysis is common in negotiations (Paramasivam, 2024; Zhu, 2024; Drew and Heritage, 2023; Townley, 2021; Adler-Nissen and Drieschova, 2019; Putnam, 2010), if there are, mostly the negotiation study cores into price negotiation and bargaining (Diaz, et al., 2024; Heddaya, et al., 2023; Boothby, et al., 2022; Satavetin, 2018; Gardani, 2017; Twitchell, et al., 2013), outcomes of negotiations (Chen and Wang, 2022) and politeness strategies (Paramasivam, 2024; Xue and Zhang, 2024). Thereupon, numerous studies have explored how negotiations contributed to general meeting discourses (Oehlschläger et al., 2023; Roderick et al., 2021; Du-Babcock and Chan, 2018; Peleckis and Peleckienė, 2015), but barely on the project meetings of a specific problem-solving negotiation interactions. Hedging strategies in this study focus on the types and functions of hedging strategies, indetermination, subjectivisation and depersonalization (Martin-Martin, 2008) which edify the problem-solving negotiations in detail. The functions of hedging strategies (Harutyunyan and Baghrmian, 2022), mitigating and/or intensifying) in this study determined the negotiation strategies exercised by the negotiating parties. This current study emphasized the functions of hedging which could either weaken (mitigating) or strengthen (intensifying) statements or claims (Harutyunyan and Baghrmian, 2022;

Spencer-Oatey, 2008). It is rather stigmatized that hedging was mainly to make things fuzzy, whilst this study enlightens the other side of hedging functions which is to amplify statements or claims. This study elucidates on the other side of hedging as intensifier as part of the negotiation strategies.

Generally, this study examines the types and functions of hedging strategies as negotiation strategies exercised by two negotiating parties. A collection of five problem-solving negotiation interactions was analyzed to first identify and compare the types and functions of hedging strategies applied by both negotiating parties. The findings then were further analyzed to determine the types of negotiation strategies applied by both parties. The questions measured include (a) What hedging strategies for negotiation are used by an Iranian company and a Malaysian company in project meetings? and (b) How do hedging strategies used by the two negotiating parties function as negotiation strategies in project meetings?

Literature review

Business negotiation (problem-solving)

Since the fundamental proposition of the study deals with business negotiation, specifically problem-solving interactions, the researcher has opted some definitions and literature of negotiations as reference of the study. Literature presents many definitions for negotiations. Whether we are talking about daily routines or significant business processes, we can essentially negotiate any event, circumstance, or action (Cristi, 2018). Karrass (2016) defines negotiation involves exchanging thoughts or opinions with someone who has a different perspective in order to plan, solve difficulties, or find common ground on every issue that both parties face. This is very much aligned to the current study which involved problem-solving negotiations. Prassa and Stalikasstates (2020) stated that negotiation allows us to get what we want from other people while also allowing them to get what they want from us. It is also acknowledged that negotiation is a skill set that can be acquired and practiced, allowing people to use power, relationships, information, and other elements to their advantage in each negotiation (Ren, 2024). Additionally, Hendrayana (2020) terms negotiation as the process in which two or more parties first make distinct compromises before coming to a mutually beneficial agreement. Therefore, it can be defined that business negotiation is the process by which multiple parties attempt to reach a consensus on one or more issues which could refer to involved parties, negotiation process, negotiation tactics, negotiation outcomes and involved changes. Despite the importance of negotiations in business operations, there is insufficient information regarding what actually takes place during business negotiations (Dharshini, 2020). In addition, meeting discourse studied in negotiation was broadly cultural (Ren, 2024; Huang, 2010) and decision making (Dharshini, 2020; Satavetin, 2018), less tapering into problem solving which lacking in terms of the negotiation interaction process itself. Problem-solving negotiations are the process of interaction in brainstorming ideas and finding solutions pertaining to certain issues (Sengupta et al., 2021) that frequently occurred during the project. Thereupon, numerous studies have explored how negotiations contributed to general meeting discourses (Oehlschläger et al., 2023; Roderick et al., 2021; Du-Babcock and Chan, 2018; Peleckis and Peleckienė, 2015), but barely on the project meetings of a specific problem-solving negotiation interactions. This study hence studies the problem-solving interactions in business negotiations.

Hedging strategies

The majority of researchers now agree that hedging is a strategy in interaction, albeit there are still significant differences in the criteria used in hedging studies be it in written or oral discourse (Johansen, 2020). Hedging in this study refers to strategies that lessen or reinforce an utterance's force or presumed negative or positive impact on the listeners. According to Johansen (2020), hedging strategies denotes a broad pragmatic concept involving nearly any expression of confidence or possibility, or with a reinforcing or downtoning function. This study adopted and adapted Martin-Martin (2008) taxonomy of hedging strategies which includes hedging devices which are used by negotiators at a lexico-grammatical and syntactic level to fulfil the functions of hedging. The hedging strategies involved in this study are indetermination, subjectivisation and depersonalization.

Table 1. Taxonomy of Hedging Strategies.

Hedging strategies	Description
Indetermination	By giving a proposition, a colouring of lesser semantic, qualitative and quantitative explicitness as well as of uncertainty, vagueness, and fuzziness.
Subjectivisation	This strategy involves confidence in the negotiators towards negotiational discourse.
Depersonalization	This strategy refers to those cases in which the negotiators diminish their presence in the negotiations by using various impersonal agentless and passive construction in order to relieve themselves of responsibility for the truth of the propositions expressed.

Source: Martin-Martin (2008).

Hedging devices

Since Martin-Martin (2008) taxonomy of hedging strategies, in which his study focused on written discourse, there is a deficiency of in-depth discovery on oral discourse. The hedging devices investigated by the study were insufficient for this current study. Hedging devices function as qualifiers in which they mitigate or intensify utterances that affect the level of uncertainty and specificity of statements (Nugroho, 2002). Hence, the hedging devices were gathered from a tabulated and triangulated hedging devices from certain studies (Arthur and Fenyi, 2022; Salager-Meyer, 2011; Hassan, 2019; Martin-Martin, 2003; Crompton, 1997; Prince et al., 1982): (1) indetermination (*Table 2*); (2) subjectivisation (*Table 3*); (3) depersonalization (*Table 4*).

Table 2. The summary of indetermination.

Category	Description
Epistemic modality	
Modal auxiliary	expressing possibility, such as may, might, can.
Semi-auxiliaries	to seem, to appear
Epistemic lexical verbs	to suggest, to speculate, to assume, that is, verbs which relate to the probability of a proposition or hypothesis being true
Verbs of cognition	to believe, to think
Modal adverbs	perhaps, possibly, probably
Modal nouns	possibility, assumption, suggestion
Modal adjectives	possible, probable, likely
Approximators	
Quantity, frequency, degree	Indicate an unwillingness to make precise and complete commitment to the proposition expressed Convey a range (rounders (Prince et al. (1982) Generally, approximately, most, relatively, frequently
If clauses	
If true / if nothing	This strategy is used to refer to the strategy of hedging as Salager-Meyer (2011) suggests.
But there's nothing wrong	It is used to show uncertainty or doubt concerning a condition.

Interrogative constructions Do you agree with me? What do you think?	Hyland (2010) says that questions are treated as one form of non-lexical hedging, they are used to refer to the limitation of knowledge. It is used to show uncertainty or doubt concerning a condition.
Attributive shields These are expressions which are used to attribute the responsibility of the proposition to someone other than the addresser	Personal attributives (According to him) Impersonal attributives (According to the report)
Adaptors somewhat, sort of, almost describable as, some, a little bit	relate to class membership

Table 3. *The summary of subjectivisation.*

Category	Description
Plausibility shields To our knowledge In our view In my experience I think I suppose	Can be interpreted as addressers' signaling that what they say is simply their personal/ subjective opinion. Express the addresser's personal doubt and direct involvement. The use of personal pronouns (I/we) followed by verbs of cognition (think / believe) or performative verbs (suppose / suggest)
Quality Extremely interesting Particularly important	Emphasizing adjectival and adverbial expressions. To convince the addressees of the importance/ truth of the propositions expressed by revealing the addresser's emotional state.
Introductory phrase You know Well	They are considered as a device to engage the addressee with conversation.

Table 4. *The summary of depersonalization.*

Category	Description
Agentless passive and impersonal constructions An attempt was made to see It seems It appears that	Is used to avoid very general subject such as people, someone, we, one, and impersonal you and they The role of the agent is not represented
Impersonal active constructions The findings suggest/reveal	Personal subject is placed by the same non-human entity

Functions of hedging strategies

The functions of hedging are categorized as mitigating and/or intensifying as in *Figure 1*. Further, Martin-Martin (2008) outlines the main functions hedging serves in communication that were aligned with the current study. The functions are: (1) Strengthening Function: functions as intensifier (Harutyunyan and Baghramyan, 2022); (2) Politeness/weakening Function: functions as mitigation (Harutyunyan and Baghramyan, 2022).

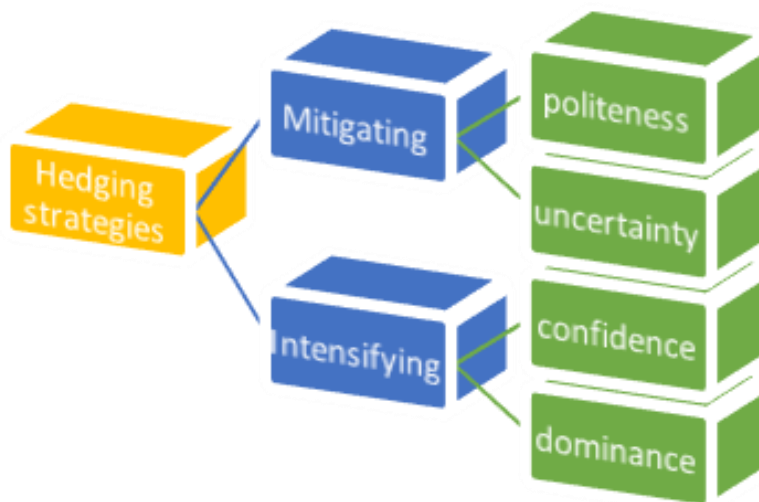


Figure 1. Functions of Hedging.
Source: Harutyunyan and Baghranyan (2022)

Negotiation strategies

Negotiation strategies are plans of action to achieve a goal or objective during the negotiation process. Negotiation strategy is the goal-directed behaviour that people use to try to reach a mutual understanding (Weingart et al., 1990). Negotiation strategies in this study adopted Types of Negotiation Strategies (Walton and McKersie, 1965). The strategies comprise of distributive and integrative strategies. The traits of distributive and integrative strategies were referred to some studies and literature (Benetti et al., 2021; Abigail et al., 2018; Stoshikj, 2014; Twitchell et al., 2013). The purpose of distinguishing the traits of both strategies is to identify the next analysis of the study which is the hedging strategies that function as negotiation strategies. The fundamental concepts of negotiation strategies for this study embraces relationship maintaining and dominance (Peleckis, 2014). This is intricately linked with the types of negotiation strategies by Walton and McKersie (1965), integrative and distributive negotiation strategies (Table 5).

Table 5. Traits for distributive and integrative negotiation.

Distributive	Integrative
Inflexible	Compromise
Competitive	Collaboration
Inconsiderate	Consideration
Self-gain	Mutual gain
Win-lose	Win-win
Show power/authority	Maintain relationship/ rapport

Materials and Methods

Sample and data collection

Purposive sampling was applied in selecting the participants of the study. The sampling was chosen as they could provide valuable contributions to the current investigation. The participants for the study were an Iranian client (Iranian Company) 2

engineers and a technician from a food engineering and technology company (Malaysian Company). The project chosen by the participants was the current project that ran at that particular time. The details of participants involved in this study are as in *Table 6*. For this study, qualitative observations and recordings were the main method of data collection. This data collection was acquired based on the need to observe the negotiation interaction dynamic naturally between a Malaysian Company and Iranian Company. A collection of five problem-solving negotiation interactions was observed, recorded and transcribed.

Table 6. *Participants involved in observation.*

Name	Position	Experience (years)	Companies
A	Engineer	11	Malaysian Company (MC)
Z	Engineer	8	Malaysian Company (MC)
B	Technician	15	Malaysian Company (MC)
F	Project manager	14	Iranian Company (IC)

Conceptual framework

Hedging strategies for negotiation

After the data collected were transcribed, the problem-solving negotiation interactions were first determined by the researcher. The next step was to identify the hedging strategies used by the meeting participants; the researcher checked the interactions line by line to identify the hedging devices. The hedging devices were then categorized under the hedging strategies. The hedging devices under every hedging strategy were adapted and adopted from a few hedging studies (Hassan, 2019; Martin-Martin, 2008; 2003; Vass, 2004; Prince et al., 1982). The hedging devices were then categorized under the hedging strategies which are indetermination, subjectivisation and depersonalization (Martin-Martin, 2008) with the orientation of some literature. A profound analysis of hedging strategies and their functions (Hassan, 2019; Nemickienė, 2014; Martin-Martin, 2008; 2003; Vass, 2004; Prince et al., 1982) were identified and analyzed. The functions of hedging strategies found in the study were then mapped to the functions of hedging (Harutyunyan and Baghrmian, 2022); mitigating or intensifying. This was to further classify the negotiation strategies (*Figure 2*).

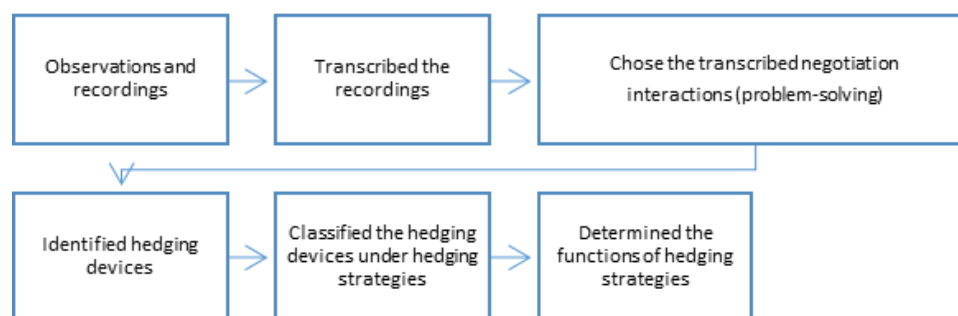


Figure 2. *Hedging strategies for negotiation.*

Negotiation strategies

The functions of hedging strategies found in the findings were plotted to two main functions of hedging strategies which are mitigating and intensifying (Harutyunyan and Baghrmryan, 2022). This means, before identifying the two main functions of hedging, the researcher analyzed the functions of hedging strategies based on the literature (Harutyunyan and Baghrmryan, 2022; Hassan, 2019; Martin-Martin, 2008; 2003; Spencer-Oatey, 2008; Crompton, 1997; Prince et al., 1982). Further classifications and functions of mitigating and intensifying were identified by the reference of literature (Harutyunyan and Baghrmryan, 2022; Hassan, 2019; Nemickienė, 2015; Hyland, 2010; Martin-Martin, 2008; 2003; Spencer-Oatey, 2008; Crompton, 1997; Prince et al., 1982). The framework was formulated based on the literature review. The functions of hedging (mitigating and intensifying) identified would determine the types of negotiation strategies (distributive or integrative strategy). This analysis follows established theory in negotiation analysis and allows users of this classification methodology to better understand the identification of the negotiation strategies (*Figure 3*).

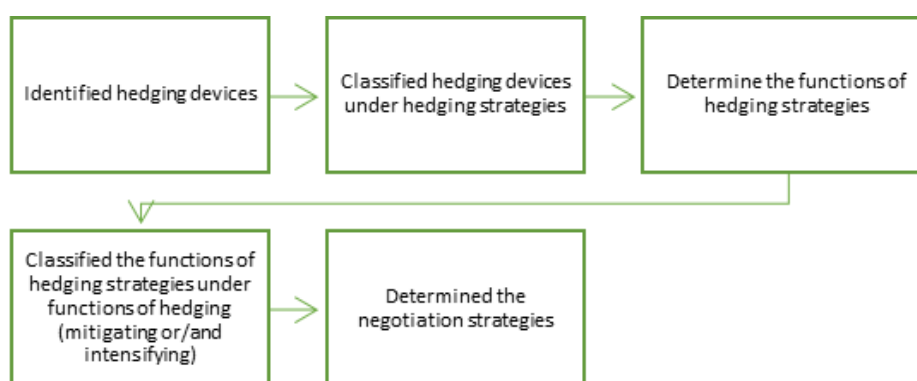


Figure 3. Negotiation strategies.

Framework for data analysis

Hedging strategies

This section can be interpret through *Figure 4*.

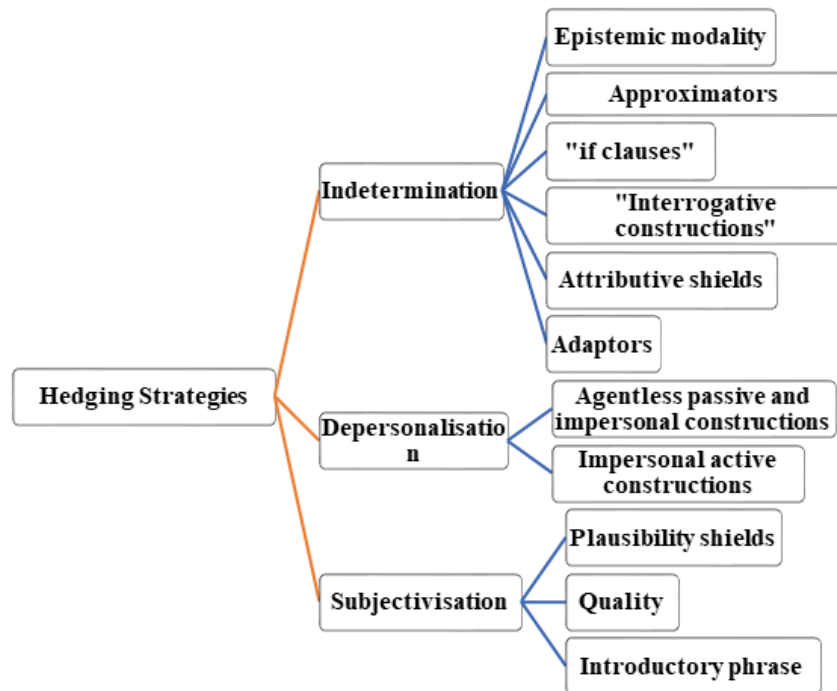


Figure 4. Taxonomy of hedging strategies and hedging devices.

Functions of hedging strategies and hedging

According to Oktay (2020), interpretation of hedging should be understood according to the type of speech act used. Thus, the researcher trailed his and some past studies data analysis procedures of functions of hedging to analyze her functions of hedging. The functions of hedging strategies found in the findings were mapped to the traits of negotiation strategies. The matches are as in *Table 7*.

Table 7. Orientation of functions of hedging and hedging strategies.

Mitigating (lack of commitment)	Intensifying (full commitment to the force)
To convey information unobtrusively	To strengthen claims
To detach oneself from commitment	To strengthen command
To weaken propositions	To cue command
To mitigate the effect of the utterances	To intensify statements
To mitigate commitment	To intensify disagreement
To mitigate claims	To intensify claims
To reduce involvement	To strengthen statements
To alleviate claims	
To mitigate propositions	
To mitigate agreement	

Hedging strategies

To identify the types of negotiation strategies, the functions of hedging strategies found in the study were mapped to the functions of hedging (Harutyunyan and Baghramyan, 2022). The identifications were then mapped to the traits of both integrative and distributive strategies. The hedging strategies were mapped to the function of hedging which is mitigating. The prominent traits of the indetermination and depersonalization hedging strategies showed that the negotiators were mostly mitigated

when using hedging devices. Next, the functions of hedging found in the study (weakening the strength) classified under mitigating then were mapped to the traits of integrative (Figure 5). The hedging strategies were mapped to the function of hedging which is intensifying. The prominent traits of the indetermination and subjectivisation hedging strategies steered that negotiators were primarily intensified when using hedging devices. Afterward, the functions of hedging found in the study (strengthening the weak) classified under intensifying then were mapped to the traits of distributive (Figure 6).

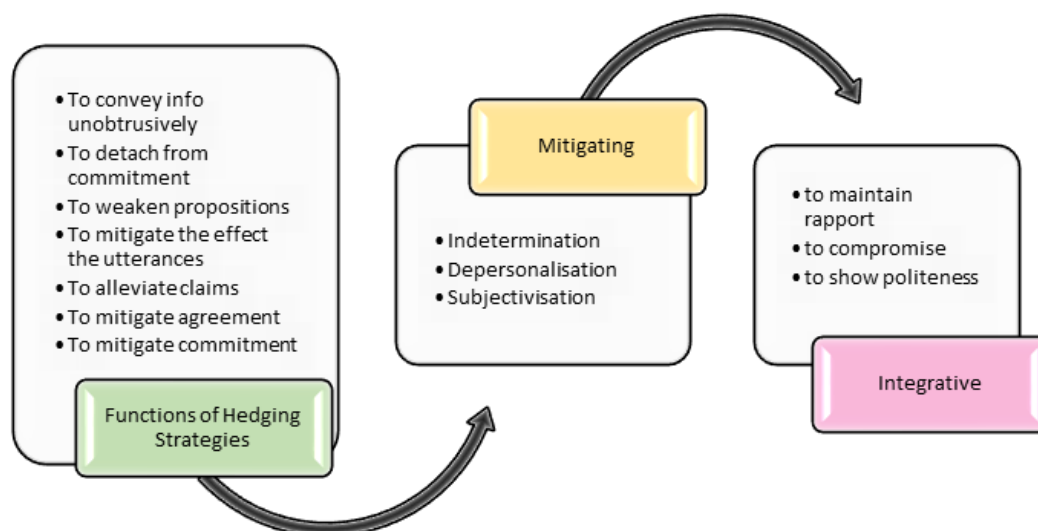


Figure 5. Orientation of mitigating to integrative negotiation.

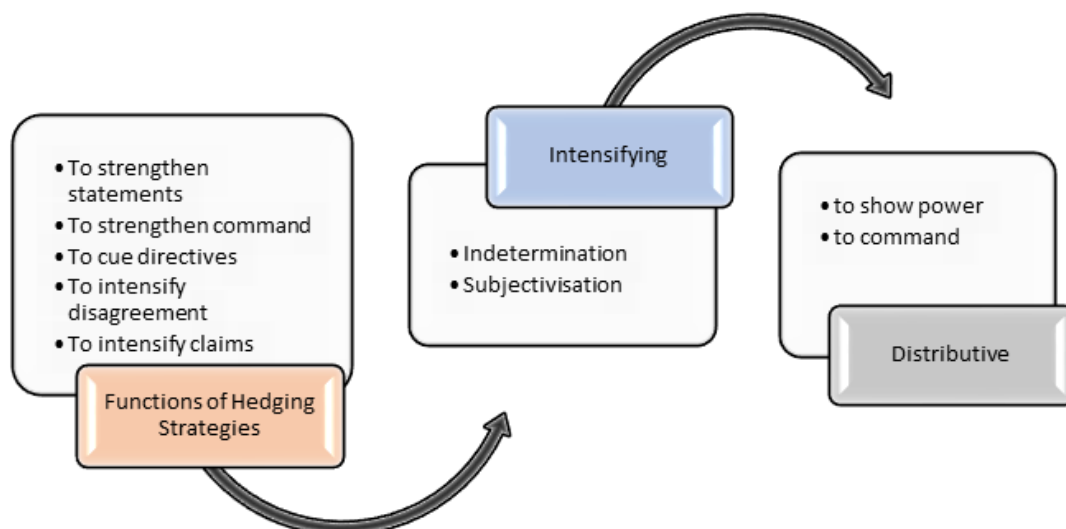


Figure 6. Orientation of intensifying to distributive strategy.

Results and Discussion

Hedging strategies

Inclusively, it could be observed that distinct number and functions of hedging strategies were exercised by both parties in every negotiation interaction of problem-solving. The abstract of hedging strategies applied are as in Table 8 (Figure 7 and

Figure 8). Table 8 depicts the overall occurrences and frequencies of hedging strategies by IC and MC in the data sets identified from the negotiation interactions. It can be seen in Figure 7 and Figure 8 that indetermination was predominantly used by both MC and IC. However, the MC (83) showed more usage compared to IC (65). Subjectivisation displayed practically the same amount from both parties; MC (44) and IC (48). While depersonalization was applied more by IC (5) compared to MC (2). However, based on the findings, the functions of hedging strategies exercised by both parties were diverse. Further essentials are presented in Table 9 and descriptions are extended below the table for each hedging strategy.

Table 8. Frequencies of hedging strategies in project meetings.

Hedging strategies/ interaction	MC (Frequency)						IC (Frequency)					
	1	2	3	4	5	T	1	2	3	4	5	T
Indetermination	35	8	18	9	13	83	15	13	26	5	6	65
Subjectivisation	14	2	10	7	11	44	6	4	16	9	13	48
Depersonalization	3	0	0	1	1	5	0	0	2	0	0	2

Table 9. Functions of hedging strategies and hedging in project meetings.

Hedging strategies	MC		IC	
	Mitigating	Intensifying	Mitigating	Intensifying
Indetermination	To mitigate claims	To intensify statements	-	To strengthen command
	To reduce commitment			To intensify statements
	To alleviate claims	To strengthen claims		To strengthen claims
	To mitigate propositions	To strengthen claims		
Subjectivisation	To convey information unobtrusively			
	To weaken propositions	To strengthen claims	To mitigate agreement	To strengthen command
	To mitigate the effect of the utterances	To intensify statements		To cue command
	To mitigate statements	To defend oneself		To intensify disagreement
Depersonalization	To mitigate subsequent statement	To strengthen claims		To intensify statements
	To convey information unobtrusively	-	-	To strengthen statements
	To detach oneself from commitment			
	To reduce involvement			
	To mitigate commitment			

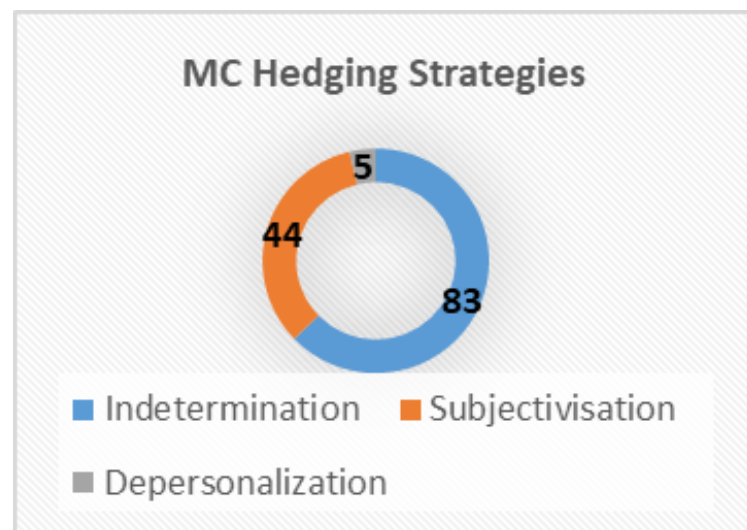


Figure 7. Frequencies of MC hedging strategies.

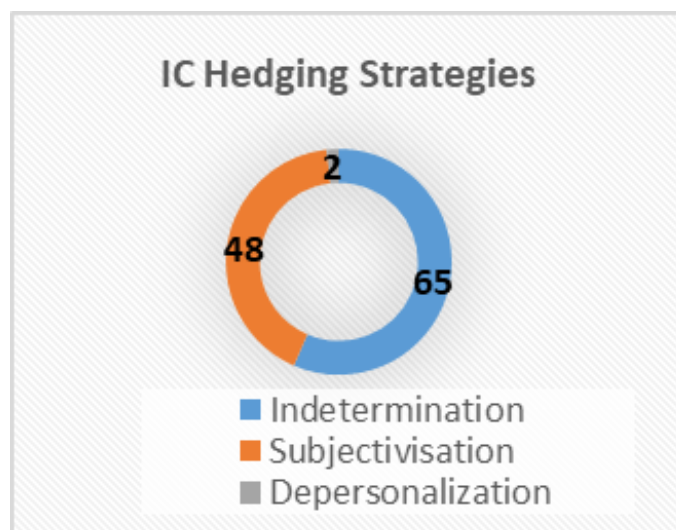


Figure 8. Frequencies of IC hedging strategies.

Indetermination

A certain degree of rhetorical variation was found mainly in terms of the frequency of use of the strategy of indetermination (epistemic modality and approximators). Overall, indetermination strategy was applied higher by MC compared to IC. MC displays 83 occurrences while IC 65. As shown in *Table 10*, approximations were abundantly exercised by both parties in indetermination. MC depicts 46 occurrences while IC shows 25. Overall, for MC, this category of hedging strategy is found to help soften the utterances, reduce commitment and mitigate the force of the statement, depleting the risk of negative responses from IC. Additionally, the strategy is observed to augment the ambiguity of a statement or response, for instance, the employment of some these phrases, “What not”, “Not that long”, “A lot of time”, “Certain things”, “Many problems”, “Everything is fine”, “Almost there”, “On the way”, “Nothing much”, “Around next week”, “Figure things out”, and others. These examples illustrate the expressions of vagueness and imprecision that are conveyed by approximators are thought to be adequately appropriate, especially while making claims during the negotiations. Besides, IC’s 65 approximators were observed to intensify his statements instead of mitigating them. IC seemed to play dominant even in the use of approximators. For instance, “some alterations”, “what not” and “so many things”. There were in some negotiation interactions, IC showed higher occurrences of approximators compared to MC. Nonetheless, this did not indicate that IC was mitigating, in fact he was practicing authority and dominance via approximators.

Table 10. Some examples of indetermination strategies found in this study.

Hedging strategies	Description
Companies	MC
Epistemic modality	We cannot proceed; We cannot; All will; We can get other supplier; I will figure things out; I will present to you; We can do this; We cannot do anything; I will recheck
Approximators	Not that long; No enough tubes; Whatnot; A lot of time; Certain things; On the way; Nothing much; Few days ago; All is ok; Anything ; On the way; Around next week; Figure things out; Around 150 tubes; Many problems; Everything is fine; Almost there; InshaAllah; Finger crossed
"If clauses"	In case any tubes break; If we proceed, we can do it next project
Interrogative constructions	Why not? Who know(s)? Can we check? We can? What do you think, guys?
Attributive shields (Personal)	J said; The supplier said; As you mentioned; As we ordered; The supplier told me; You said last week; Our finance said
Attributive shields (Impersonal)	Our whatsoevermeasurement; Our specs; As per our discussion; Stated on the proposal; Our proposal

Adaptors	Means; Meaning	IC
Companies		
Epistemic modality	We can have a thorough checking; We should proceed; I cannot tell you	
Approximators	Overtime ; At any cost; Do something about it; Every single time; Everything; ASAP; Some alterations; So many things	
"If clauses"	If not it's going to be delay; If you cannot handle the problems; If not you are the trouble ; If we want to change supplier ; If not you won't have work	
Interrogative constructions	Haven't you? We can, right? So, how? How? Anyone? How many we have? Anybody's here? Am I right? We can do, right? The tubes are here, right? So? What's the solution?	
Attributive shields (Personal)	For me	
Attributive shields (Impersonal)	Meant as it is	
Adaptors	Means	

Next category of indetermination is epistemic modality. Again, MC showed higher (23) overall usage compared to IC (9). The strategy by MC was mostly exercised in giving assurance and assertion. The epistemic modality in MC negotiations could be observed as an essential rhetorical strategy and could be seen as another useful ingredient for negotiations as it articulates probabilities and logical predictions, especially when making promises. The use of "I will", "We will", "You should", "Finger crossed", "InshaAllah", "We can", "We could", and others in the negotiations exemplifies that epistemic modality played a role of lessening down the commitment and obligation placed onto the negotiation table. Compared to IC, the usage of epistemic modality was to intensify the force of the modal verbs. For example, "I will just proceed" and "I will make". These were denoted as directives rather than commissives. Next is "If/ but clauses". IC displays higher occurrences (13) in comparison to MC (4). It could be seen that IC use of "if clauses" were directed to directiveness, such threats and warnings. For instance, "If not you won't have work", "If you don't check, there will be trouble", "If not you are the trouble" and others. This strategy was applied by IC to express (rather unpleasant) consequences based on the temporary hypothetical assumption of its antecedent. This was observed to place force into his directives. In contrast, MC "If clauses" were prone to demonstrating uncertainty or doubt concerning a condition and it was more to positive controls. For example, "If we proceed, we can do it next project". Based on the example, MC negotiated the outcome of the statements made to IC that was likely (but not guaranteed) to happen. He was mitigating his guarantee.

The following are interrogative constructions. The findings revealed that IC applied this strategy higher (12) than MC (5). IC tended to employ more interrogative constructions since dominance was in attendance. Hence, the interrogations were viewed as 'directiveness'. For instance, "How many we have?", "We can, right?", "So, how?", "How?", "Anyone?", and "Haven't you?". Some of the interrogations patently displayed directives. For MC, the interrogative constructions used were mainly to seek support. The utilization of "Right?" was repetitively exercised by IC. This, somehow, showed hesitation and uncertainty in his uttering propositions. For attributive shields, IC displays 9 occurrences while MC illustrates 16. For MC, it could be observed that the gist of attributive shields function is to shift the responsibility to others as to defend the negotiator's inadequate knowledge. It was a deliberate attempt by MC to conceal anything displeasing by mere rhetoric. Additionally, attributive shields are divided into two subcategories which are personal and impersonal. Both, conversely, convey the same message of the negotiation; to accredit the negotiators' belief conveyed in the proposition to someone else. These hearer-oriented hedging strategies intended to attend to the acceptability of the statements made to the hearers. Personal shields from MC's

negotiations identified in attributive shields are “As you mentioned”, “The supplier said”, “As we ordered”, “J said”, “He said”, “The supplier told me”, and others. While for impersonal shields are “As discussed in the meeting”, “Our whatever measurement”, and others. Those shields by MC were observed to alleviate his statements, guarantees and claims made to IC. This was to weaken the strength, meaning to reduce the commitment in his propositions. Additionally, it was observed that IC applied impersonal more than personal shields. This is pertaining to shielding himself, but not in an obvious manner. For example, “If not it’s going to be delayed for me”. Here, mitigation was in attendance. Nevertheless, dominancy was in attendance too in IC’s personal shield when he uttered “for me”. That indicated that intensification was placed into the hedging.

The least usage of indetermination is adaptors; MC (2), IC (1). This category was employed when both parties wanted to reemphasize or restate the utterances. The only adaptor used by both parties was “means”. It is believed that both parties placed some confidence onto the negotiation table. Sometimes, it could be observed that both parties used adaptors to the propositions which are almost accurate, but they did not feel convinced enough. From the above analysis of indetermination, it can be concluded that indetermination was principally employed by negotiators as the strategy was exercised to cautiously state a stance, especially when articulating probabilities and logical predictions (Crompton, 1997). By staying universal and evading particular details, the negotiators prevented making imprecise declarative statements in solving the project issues. Other than that, negotiators placed indetermination to boost not only confidence but to intensify the statements made to show power, especially IC.

Subjectivisation

Subjectivisation in *Table 11* shows MC depicts a slightly higher (42) occurrence compared to IC (31). MC illustrates 18 occurrences while IC depicts 4. In the negotiations, most plausibility shields utilized by MC indicated uncertainty on behalf of the negotiator towards the content of the proposition (Johansen, 2020). The employment of “I think” (the most usage by MC in the negotiations) “I supposed”, “I guess”, “I thought”, “I promise”, “I believe” and many more, in these negotiations did not really impact the truth merit of the propositional content transmitted in the statements. The strategy concerns more the relationship between the IC and the content of the negotiations. In the problem-solving negotiations, this strategy of plausibility shields assisted the utterances of MC to be true and relevant. Into the same bargain, the use of “I mean” was to convince IC to believe the truth of a proposition put forward by MC. It could be perceived as a persuasive strategy. Plausibility shields demonstrated MC obligation to the truth of the propositional content. This is supported by Fraser (2010) that plausibility shields in these negotiations did make the utterances of ideas straightforward and are projected to help MC renounce commitment and responsibility for the overall truth of the information transmitted in the statements. For IC, his plausibility shields tended to augment his statements and directiveness towards MC. The uses of “I bet” and “I don’t think so” were some cues to his directives. Overall, the plausibility shields in the negotiations were extensively used by negotiators, which appeared rather natural as during the negotiations the negotiators voiced their own thoughts and opinions that they might want to make straightforward. Withal, the pronoun ‘I’ was frequently used in negotiations to seek mutual ground and build rapport. It can be as well deduced as the negotiators implying that what they said was

purely their individual view. In this manner, the negotiators established respect for the listener's alternative views and influenced the listeners towards their negotiation goals.

Table 11. *Some examples of subjectivisation strategies found in this study.*

Hedging strategies	Companies	Description		
		Plausibility shields	Quality	Introductory phrase
Subjectivisation	MC	I mean	Most biggest	Well...
		I believe	Really doubt	That's why...
		I'm sure	Extra hidden	But...
		I think	Our very best	
		I really doubt	So many things	
		I believe	Absolutely	
		I supposed	Especially	
		I promise	Quite true	
		All I know		
Subjectivisation	IC	I bet	Very well prepared	I know, I know
		I don't think so	Very important to me	So...
			The very main problem	By the way...
			Quite complicated	Well...
			So very true	

Quality by IC in the negotiations was exercised rather frequently (17) in the subjectivisation compared to MC (11). This strategy appeared to emphasize the adjectival and adverbial expressions in the statements made. For MC, several quality strategies were observed to be intensifiers ("so many things", "absolutely" and "Especially") and some indicated as mitigation ("quite true"). For mitigation, quality exercised by MC was to influence IC of the certainties of the statements conveyed by disclosing MC's emotional state (Salager-Meyer, 2011). Besides, MC wished IC to agree to the justification given to the resolution and the utilization of two adverbials makes the overall negotiation more convincing and more persuasive. While IC's quality hedging devices were observed to primarily take intensifiers ("Very well prepared", "Very important to me", "Our very main problem"). Those intensifiers were directed to his self-interest which to direct MC to adhere to his interest. His quality items were observed to augment and boost the quality of the assertions made into the negotiations. The use of "So very", "Quite much", "Most biggest", "Really doubt", "Extra hidden", "Very well", "Very important", and others. However, IC usage of quality was prone to practicing power rather than maintaining rapport. This could be observed when some of the quality strategies placed onto the negotiation table were to force MC to complete task efficiently and professionally. Quality hedging strategy in IC negotiations attached a reliable outcome that would induce MC towards the belief that IC was extra confident of what he uttered and of his capabilities thus causing the MC to think IC were indeed competent and dominant. However, there are some circumstances where IC mitigation was played in quality. For instance, "Quite complicated".

Next, MC displays 16 occurrences of introductory phrases whilst IC 11. MC's introductory phrases mostly displayed mitigation rather than intensification. This could be observed towards the usage of the repetitive phrases of "but". Most usages of the introductory phrases in the negotiations reflected MC's intentions that they were delicately managing or processing the information they were considering stated. For IC, the use of 'well', "so", "by the way", "I know, I know" and others, was an attempt to command and direct MC towards certain actions (e.g. get influenced on his solutions). In this scenario, it could be said that IC demonstrated some sort of 'force' on the

listeners to attend to their upcoming statements while demonstrating authority. Overall, it is also observed that the use of introductory phrases at the beginning of an utterance was an attempt to engage the listeners with the statements that the negotiators were about to utter; whether positive or negative. Overall, it can be said that the use of subjectivisation in the studied negotiations was not merely to display mitigation but also to demonstrate confidence in statements made to secure the negotiations. It could be considered as a persuasive strategy to secure negotiations and to negotiate unresolved issues (Hassan and Said, 2020).

Depersonalization

The least hedging strategy applied in the negotiations is depersonalization (*Table 12*). The findings reveal IC depicts 6 occurrences while MC 7. In the negotiations observed, MC employed this strategy more than IC to allow MC to present the statements without direct personal attribution. MC attempted to condense his participation in the statements or commitments made (Harutyunyan and Baghranyan, 2022). MC appeared to avoid personal attribution to the commitments and permit IC to partake in the negotiations since the nonpresence of the personal pronouns assisted him to subside their sole presence in the statements. Both agentless passive and impersonal constructions and impersonal active constructions strategies by MC carried the main symmetrical function; to alleviate and vague his responsibility by the nonhuman entities. This was mainly seen as to shift blame by reducing his involvement in the promises, guarantees, statements and commitments made. Nevertheless, IC usage of both agentless passive and impersonal constructions and impersonal active constructions were observed to play with his self-interest. This was seen as an intensifier to augment his statements by placing non-alive entities or himself as the main roles. For instance, “for me” and “the proposal and budget...”.

Table 12. Some examples of subjectivisation strategies found in this study.

Hedging strategies	Companies	Description	
		Agentless passive and impersonal constructions	Impersonal active constructions
Depersonalization	MC	It seems	It's the tubes the most biggest problem
		It takes a lot of time	The tubes are on the way
	IC	The budget proposed and approved	It is going to be troublesome
			The proposal should be brought

Overall, both agentless passive and impersonal constructions and impersonal active constructions functioned to demonstrate collective resolutions. The negotiators operated the strategy to impart mutual beliefs and resolutions with allied meeting participants. Apart from that, it was to emphasize the magnitude of membership and the spirit of ‘togetherness’ in suggesting, finding or sharing solutions. Consequently, the use of depersonalization hedging strategy in these negotiations basically served to diminish the negotiators’ presence and responsibilities in the claims and statements made and to inject persuasion into the negotiations. The main aim of the use of depersonalization was to detach or even eliminate MC’s presence from commitment. Both agentless passive and impersonal constructions and Impersonal active constructions seemed to fulfill the rhetorical goal by presenting the information in a way that makes the project seem to have life on its own. This strategy was ultimately conveyed unhidden agenda that to convey information in an unobtrusive manner. MC did not place himself as the doer rather replacing ‘unalive entities’ into his statement. The strategy also suggested

that MC was basically expressing his personal opinion that he predicted would pending IC's judgement and receive possible acceptance of his statements.

Negotiation strategies

Table 13 concludes the findings of the above table in which hedging strategies functioned as negotiation strategies employed by MC and IC. It could be observed that MC was prone to employ integrative strategy compared to IC. It could be said that MC's ultimate goal of negotiation strategies is the maintenance of courteous relations and the achievement of a quality negotiation process and mutually beneficial outcome. IC was subjected to much distributive strategy since his dominance was observed in all negotiation interactions. However, towards the end of the meeting, it could be viewed that IC did employ integrative strategy in his negotiations. This could be linked to the relationship between both parties that had escalated, and most issues had been resolved. The vice versa phenomenon happened in the first two negotiation interactions. This means, in the first two interactions, MC did not employ distributive strategies while IC did not utilize integrative strategies. Nevertheless, as the meeting progressed, both appeared to employ both integrative and distributive strategies in their negotiation interactions. Here, dual negotiation strategies occurred in certain negotiation interactions. This denotes that both parties had better understanding on the employment of negotiation strategies as they properly adjusted their strategies based on relevant circumstances. Figure 9 shows the orientation of functions of hedging strategies to negotiation strategies. It displays that IC exercised more distributive while using hedging strategies compared to MC. This could be evidenced by the functions of hedging and hedging strategies exercised by both parties. It is proven that IC's functions of hedging strategies steered towards dominance and directiveness piloted to distributive negotiation strategy while MC was prone on relationship maintaining and compromising that led to integrative negotiation strategy.

Table 13. Frequencies of negotiation strategies in project meeting.

Negotiation interaction	MC		IC	
	Integrative	Distributive	Integrative	Distributive
Interaction 1	x			x
Interaction 2	x			x
Interaction 3	x			x
Interaction 4	x	x	x	x
Interaction 5	x	x	x	x

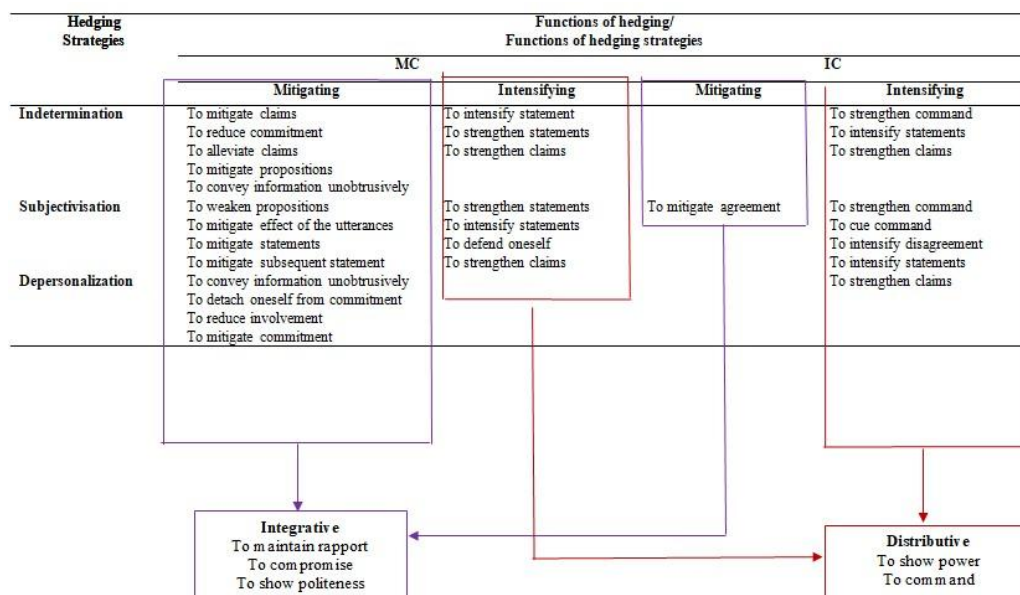


Figure 9. Orientation of functions of hedging strategies and hedging to negotiation strategies.

Into the bargain, the function of mitigation in hedging strategies conformed the integrative as according to Stoshikj (2014), one behaviour of this negotiation strategy is respecting and complying with the other party where the mitigation in the hedging strategies displayed compliance and considerations. In certain circumstances, this type of behaviour from IC with integrative attitudes often steer to a less considerable level of psychological distress during the negotiation process. This makes it much easier for the both parties to successfully reach an agreement (Benetti et al., 2021). It could be perceived that MC prominently applied integrative negotiation strategy in these negotiations. Additionally, the indetermination and subjectivisation hedging strategies imposed as intensifiers were the indication of distributive negotiation strategy. The use of hedging strategies as an intensifier could be seen when the intensification was placed towards self-interest and documented lack of compromise (Barthelmess et al., 2018) where dominance was the gist. The manipulation of dominance in the hedging strategies could be deciphered via intensifiers. While the indetermination and depersonalization indicated integrative strategies which revolved around rapport/ relationship maintaining and compromising were customarily applied by MC. Overall, IC's hedging strategies were prone to distributive, whereas MC's were inclined to integrative negotiation strategies.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study has explored the nuanced use of hedging strategies in negotiation contexts between an Iranian and a Malaysian company during project meetings. Hedging, as a linguistic and pragmatic tool, plays a critical role in mitigating and intensifying statements and claims, especially in intercultural business interactions where miscommunication can easily arise. The findings reveal that both Iranian and Malaysian negotiators employ hedging to navigate complex solutions, mitigate potential conflicts, and preserve professional relationships. However, the frequency, formality, and intent behind hedging differ subtly due to cultural norms, communication styles,

and organizational expectations. While hedging strategies are crucial to understanding negotiation dynamics in project meetings, their effectiveness in functioning as negotiation strategies is contingent on the context and the relational dynamics between participants. An acknowledgment of types and functions of hedging strategies can lead to more effective negotiation processes, particularly in complex or high-stakes project settings. Hedging strategies can be operative negotiation tools when used commendably. They offer negotiators the ability to manage language used and maintain flexibility. Thus, by acknowledging hedging strategies that function as negotiation strategies could avoid misunderstandings and accelerate the relationship between the negotiating parties. This comparative analysis underscores the importance of cultural awareness in international business settings. Recognizing and adapting to different hedging styles can enhance negotiation outcomes and foster stronger cross-border partnerships. For practitioners, this means not only mastering the technical aspects of negotiation but also cultivating intercultural competence and linguistic sensitivity. All in all, hedging strategies serve as vital communicative tools that bridge cultural gaps and facilitate collaborative negotiations in project meetings. Future research could expand on this foundation by examining hedging in other cultural pairings or exploring its impact on long-term business relationships. As global collaboration becomes increasingly common, understanding the subtleties of language use, such as hedging, will remain essential for successful and respectful negotiation.

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Conflict of interest

The authors confirm that there is no conflict of interest involved with any parties in this research study.

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